



Preparing to serve English language learner students: school districts with emerging English language learner communities



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Prepared by

Annette M. Zehler
The Center for Applied Linguistics

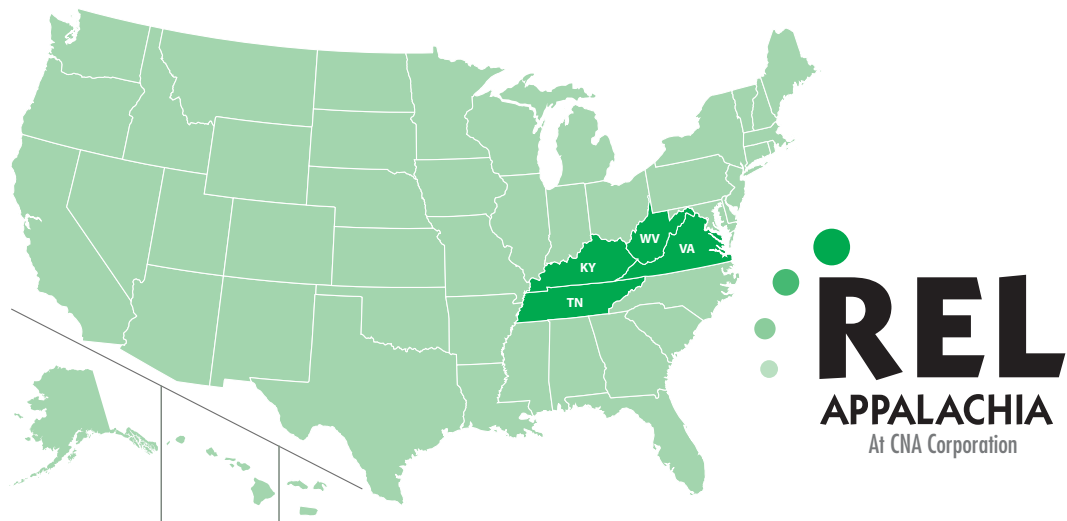
Carolyn Adger
The Center for Applied Linguistics

Cate Coburn
The Center for Applied Linguistics

Igone Arteagoitia
The Center for Applied Linguistics

Krystal Williams
The CNA Corporation

Louis Jacobson
The CNA Corporation



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Preparing to serve English language learner students: school districts with emerging English language learner communities

This report aims to help school districts deal with the challenges of newly enrolling or rapidly increasing English language learner students by offering background information and sharing the experiences of districts that have addressed similar challenges in providing services and infrastructure to support the success of English language learner students.

Major demographic shifts are occurring in school districts across the country as communities receive immigrants from countries around the world. Many immigrant families are settling in previously homogeneous communities (Capps, Fix, & Passel, 2002; Jensen, 2006). For these “emerging immigrant communities” (Wainer, 2004) such demographic changes bring new diversity to K–12 classrooms.

Administrators and teachers can use their experience with traditional students as a foundation for serving the English language learner students who are beginning to enroll in their school districts. However, without experience specific to the needs of English language learner students, schools will be challenged to involve these students in effective instruction and to build the needed infrastructure to

support them. Thus, a growing number of districts are looking for guidance as they encounter many new tasks and challenges in serving their newly diverse student populations. Title III of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 requires districts to provide educational programming, testing, and other services for all students, including English language learner students, to ensure their academic success.

This study examines the demographic changes nationally and in the Appalachia region. It also examines school districts that are receiving English language learner students for the first time or that are seeing their initially small English language learner populations increase rapidly. The goal is to better understand the needs of districts with emerging English language learner communities and to describe how they are responding to their newly diverse student populations.

Three research questions guided the work:

1. To what extent are districts within the region experiencing their first enrollments of English language learner students or rapid increases in enrollment?
2. How are districts responding to emerging English language learner communities?

For example, what needs do administrators report, and what resources are they using to meet these needs?

3. What have districts learned about serving English language learner students? As districts gain experience in working with English language learner students, are there changes in how they structure or provide services for these students?

To answer the first question, multiyear state data were analyzed to identify English language learner enrollment patterns and districts experiencing their first enrollment of English language learner students or rapid increases in such enrollments. Analysis of district-level data on enrollment of English language learner students in Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia, the four states in the Appalachia Region, found these students to be widely dispersed across the region and enrolled in a majority of districts in all four states. In many districts (38 percent of districts in Tennessee, 42 percent in Virginia, 44 percent in Kentucky, and 55 percent in West Virginia) these students represent less than 1 percent of student enrollment. However, all states except West Virginia have some districts in which English language learner students constitute 5 percent or more of total enrollment—in some districts, much more.

Additional analyses of the district-level data identified districts experiencing either their first enrollments of English language learner students or at least a 50 percent increase over a one-year period (as a proportion of total enrollment in the district). For example, in 2004/05, for the three states in which multiyear data were available, 51 of the 176 Kentucky districts

(29 percent), 28 of the 132 Virginia districts (21 percent), and 14 of the 55 West Virginia districts (25 percent) experienced such change. For all three states more districts experienced such change in 2004/05 than in 2001/02. This pattern was most pronounced for West Virginia, in which there were 6 districts in 2001/02 and 14 districts in 2004/05 that met these criteria. These findings indicate that many districts across the region are experiencing emerging English language learner communities.

To investigate research questions two and three, researchers examined the literature for materials specific to emerging English language learner communities and conducted interviews with district and school administrators. Fourteen documents were identified that address issues of emerging communities of English language learners. These documents are case studies or guides offering examples of practice and highlighting obstacles faced by districts or schools. The goals of the literature review were to find information on the needs of districts with emerging English language learner populations, to identify steps taken by districts, and to identify infrastructure components (such as staffing, professional development, curriculum, and materials) important in establishing services for English language learner students. The interviews were conducted with nine district and school administrators in districts that had experienced new and then rapidly increasing enrollments of English language learner students. The goals of the interviews included learning what steps the districts had taken, what resources they used as they began to build capacity to serve the new student population, and what changes the districts made as they gained experience in working with English language learner students.

The findings from the literature review and interviews were organized into five categories of district infrastructure (personnel, administration, instruction, assessment, and outreach) and 15 infrastructure components, with examples of district practices provided for each component. The analysis identified four stages in district responses to emerging English language learner communities: ad hoc services, consistent services, developed program of services, and expanded or integrated services.

The analysis of district-level data on English language learner enrollments in the four Appalachia Region states revealed an increasing

dispersal of English language learner students in districts across the region, implying that all districts should be prepared to serve English language learner students. The measures reported by districts suggest that capacity building passes through distinct stages in response to emerging English language learner communities. But while examples drawn from the literature review and interviews can be used to inform district administrators about various approaches that might be considered, further research with a broader range of districts is needed before any recommendations can be developed for district practice.

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